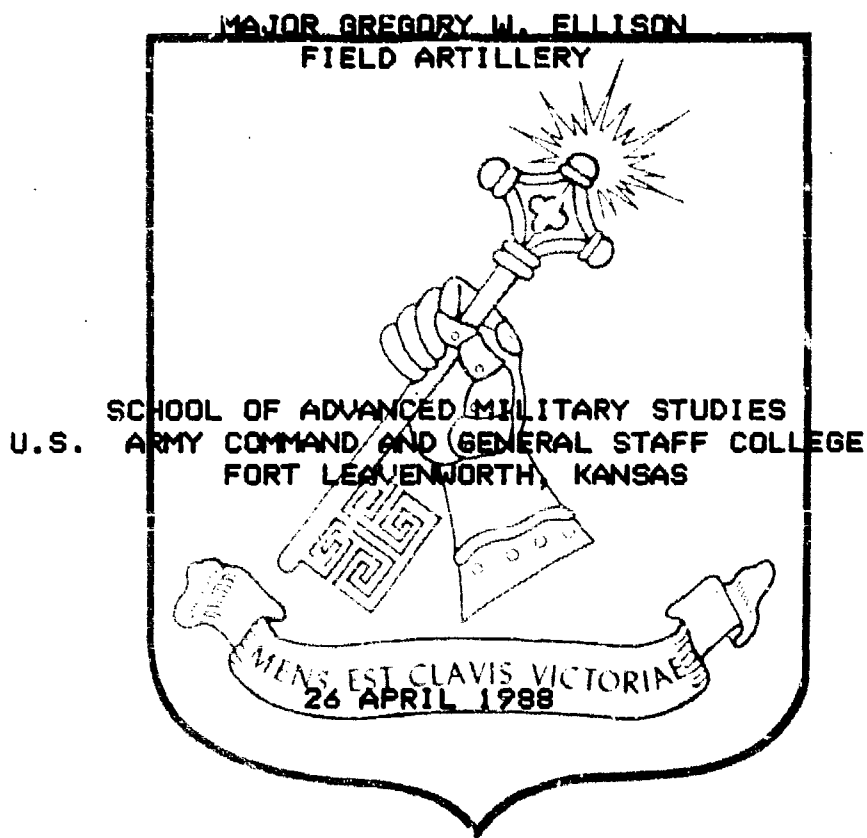


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OPERATIONAL ART: THE MISSING LINK IN THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR



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OPERATIONAL ART: THE MISSING LINK IN THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

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ABSTRACT

OPERATIONAL ART: THE MISSING LINK IN THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR
by Major Gregory W. Ellison, USA, 49 pages.

This monograph analyzes the Iran-Iraq War from its inception in September of 1980 through the Iranian Faw Counteroffensive of February 1986. It uses the precepts of operational art to examine the performance of the belligerents in this prolonged and bloody conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

On the 23rd of September 1980, Iraqi forces launched a major invasion of their neighbor Iran. As of this writing the war is well into its ninth year, thus qualifying as one of the longest wars of our time. It most certainly is one of bloodiest. Some casualty estimates approach 2.7 million killed and wounded (1) with the belligerents no further along towards resolution than they were eight years ago. This is ironic since both sides are equipped with some of the most advanced weapon systems known. Yet, the war remains one of the least understood and studied. The reasons for this are that both Iran and Iraq are politically estranged from the U.S. and that they are perceived as militarily inept. Furthermore, and probably most important, the conduct of the war has not interrupted the flow of Middle-East oil to the West. This lack of study is unfortunate because beneath the war's surface lies a wealth of knowledge for the student of operational art.

Perhaps the very futility of the war stems from inadequate application of operational art. At present the war has evolved into a static duel reminiscent of World War I, an affliction normally found in conflicts wanting for direction. This lack of operational vision has begotten the futile bloodletting which is so characteristic of this war, a war which resembles a feud more than a conflict fought to secure the vital interests of the warring nations.

The goal of this monograph is simple but challenging. I will attempt to divide the war into its component parts in order to apply some of the precepts of operational art to analyze the aimless point of the war. Specifically, I will explore the relationship between the political objectives and the military means employed to attain them. Ostensibly, the war is being waged for territorial gain. In reality the reasons for the war,

and its objectives, cut much deeper. What these reasons are and how they came to be will be examined in much detail.

A second focus will be the war itself. It is necessary to dissect the fighting into its distinct military phases so that the student of operational art can see whether those phases relate properly to the political objectives. This is a risky endeavor since much of the information provided on the war comes from the belligerents themselves. To date, no major figure from either side has recorded his account of the war. But the risks can be mitigated by examining several key works which have undertaken an in depth study of the war. These works have primarily relied upon the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) reports, daily newspaper accounts, and prestigious think tank reports as a basis for their investigations, making this monograph worthwhile for operational insights.

A third focus will concentrate on the centers of gravity for either side and identify decisive points for getting at the center of gravity. More importantly, I will attempt to determine whether either side was able to recognize the other's center of gravity in various phases of the war and whether it understood how to attack it.

Lastly, I will explore the belligerents' demonstrated ability to synchronize the elements of combat power both at the tactical and operational levels. The ability to integrate the tools of the tactical and operational commander are critical to the success of his missions. The Iran-Iraq war provides clear proof of this and is worthy of study by the student of operational art.

These constructs will be the focus of this monograph. But let us start with the historical and political motives for the war.

HISTORICAL/POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The roots of the Iran-Iraq War lay in antiquity. Its causes are complex and interwoven with religious, political, economic, and nationalistic overtones. But like any war this one can be categorized by two types of precipitant--general and specific.(2) "The general precipitants are the underlying causes of the conflict, usually rooted in history, while the specific precipitants are the more provocative and proximate causes of conflict."(3) Both types are present in this war and they are key to understanding the nature of this conflict.

For the most part Iraq's history has been one of turmoil and violence. As the cradle of civilization, Iraq has been the focal point of numerous invasions throughout recorded time(4), the most significant being the Islamic invasion in the seventh century AD. Arab armies rose rapidly in west and spread outward from Mecca, extending the influence of Islam east of the Zagros Mountains. However, the solidarity of the Islamic faith was short lived. Rival factions vying for control after Mohammed's death fractured the faith into Shia and Sunni sects. Already the die had been cast for the turmoil which would erupt in September of 1980.

Iraq's modern history traces its roots to the fallout of WW I. The League of Nations ceded Great Britain a mandate over three very diverse provinces which we recognize as modern Iraq. At the time of the mandate, this backwater of the Arab world was economically and socially deprived. The literacy rate was below 5%, poverty was universal, and traditions of civil government nonexistent.(5) "Only in the previous decade had a nascent concept of Arab national identity begun to spread amongst the small educated class, especially amongst the Arabs of Baghdad province who belonged to the orthodox Sunni sect which predominates throughout the rest of the Arab World."(6) Basra Province lay to the south along the Euphrates River.

its population was primarily Shiite Arab, the same as neighboring Iran. In the north lay Mosul Province which the British had so conveniently talked the League into incorporating in the newly formed country. The long term effects of this decision would be enormous, for Mosul was the province of the fiercely independent Kurds. However, British Imperial interests rested with oil deposits laying beneath the surface of Mosul.

A more far reaching problem for this collage of provinces was: How would Iraq be governed? The solution, for which the Ottomans prepared the way and which the British accepted as a matter of convenience, was that the Sunni Arabs controlled everything. There could be no other way for the Turks since it was a matter of religious doctrine.(7) To this day a Sunni Arab minority, hailing exclusively from the city of Takrit, continues to rule Iraq backed by strong military forces.

The Takriti's ability to sustain this minority rule has not been easy. Since the British withdrawal in 1945, the privileged members of the Sunni sect have been forced to share power with the lower-middle class Sunni army officers who have risen through the ranks, officers who had been greatly influenced by Nasser's ideas of Pan-Arabism. They found a forum for their beliefs in the Baath (Renaissance) Party. Founded in 1943 by a French-educated Christian Syrian intellectual, the party was dedicated to the creation of a single Arab state from Basra to the Atlantic.(8) Thus the Sunni elite had found a cause in which they believed and which would also help them control the Shiite Arabs and to some extent the Shiite Kurds. Now the Baath party could justify its discriminatory and dictatorial policies against the majority in the name of Pan-Arabism.

The Baath Regime formally seized power in 1968 and immediately embarked upon its goal of hegemony in the region. By the time the ambitious and ruthless Saddam Hussein became President and Commander in Chief in July of

1979, Iraq had acquired enough military strength to put some muscle behind Iraqi diplomatic initiatives and its desire for leadership throughout the region.(9)

In comparison Iran's history has not been so volatile; however, the Islamic invasion of the seventh century did change the fundamental nature of the masses. After the schism in the Moslem faith, the Shia sect predominated throughout Persia. This branch of Islam holds that all power rests in the religious leader, the Imam. This differs from the Sunni sect which makes allowances for the division of power between a secular leader, a caliph, and an Imam.

The genesis of Iran's modern history can be traced to Russian and British middle east imperialism. In 1907 Great Britain and Russia ended their feud by dividing Iran into spheres of influence. However, British and Russian hegemony over Iran was only temporary. In 1925 Reza Khan led his Cossack Brigade in a successful coup over Britain's puppet government. But the Khan's rule proved short lived, falling to a British invasion at the outset of WW II. As a matter of convenience the British elevated Khan's 22- year old son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, to the Peacock Throne. After the war the new Shah began to consolidate his power over all aspects of Iranian life.

During the fifties the Shah unleashed his feared secret police (SAVAK), eliminating all known internal opposition. These events increased his power significantly while decreasing the power of the religious leaders proportionally.

By the mid-sixties the Shah's power was absolute, and he was free to embark upon his goal of regional hegemony. The influence of the religious leaders continued to wane, undercut by government promises of a better way of life for the masses. Oil revenues financed the massive build up of land, air, and sea forces. These forces would be used to counter Iran's three

principal threats: the 100 mile border with the Soviet Union; the vulnerable sea lines of communications through the Straits of Hormuz and the lengthy border with the radical Iraqi regime.(10)

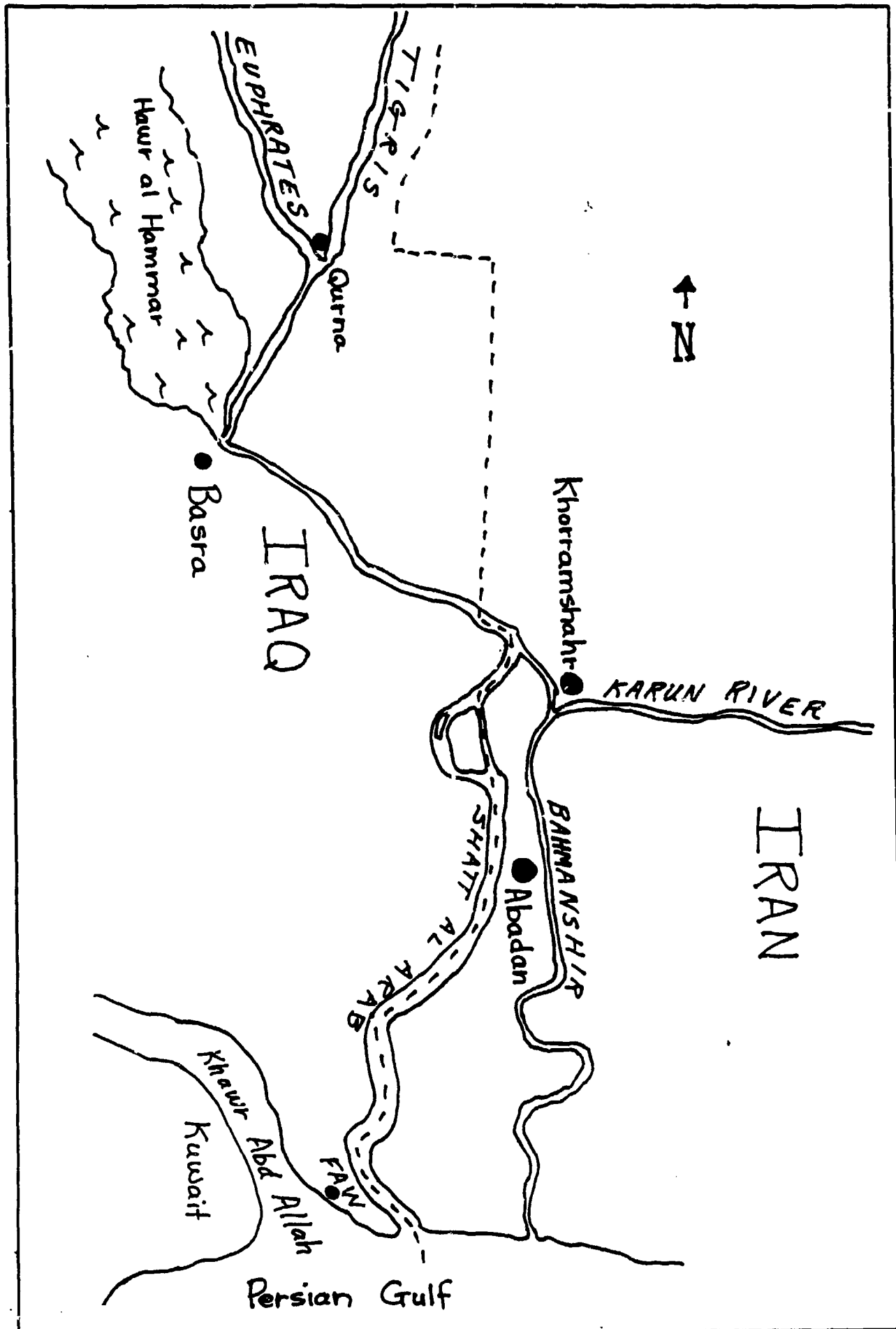
The most contentious portion of that border and the primary 'general' precipitant of the war centered on the Shatt al-Arab waterway. A 127 mile long stretch of river that constitutes the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.(11) Its importance lay in maritime access, oil rights, and national prestige, and its control has been a source of conflict throughout time.

In 1847 the British, desiring to establish a steamship line on the Shatt, coerced the Ottomans and the Iranians into drawing Iran's border as the eastern (left) bank of the Shatt, a division which ran counter to natural ethnic and cultural boundaries of the area. The new boundary separated Shiite Arabic-speaking brothers and brought Arabic Khuzestan under Persian control. With this agreement Iran gained the right of free navigation from the mouth of the Shatt to the port of Khorramshahr.(12)

The discovery of oil in the early 1900's in Khuzestan Province exacerbated the dispute over the Shatt. Tensions increased as both countries asserted their national rights to build the bases of modern economic life-- ports, railways, roads, oil facilities, and international trade-- all converging on the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.(13)

The tension over the Shatt continued unabated well into the 20th century as oil became the means by which both countries fueled their economies and foreign policy. During the 1960's Iran took steps to protect its national interests. First, she decreased her dependence on Khorramshahr, the sole conduit for export of Iranian oil, by building the Kharg Island oil terminal. Second, she set wheels in motion which would reduce Iraq's stranglehold over the Shatt. The Shah began to supply the Kurdish rebels seeking independence

Shatt al-Arab Waterway



Border -----

Not to Scale

in northeast Iraq. In response to the Kurdish unrest, Iraq was compelled to commit major portions of her army in a vain attempt to quell the revolt. Iraq was so badly hurt, both economically and militarily, that Saddam Hussein, the Foreign Minister, was obliged to sign the Algiers Agreement on 6 March 1975. Under the terms of the agreement, Iran agreed to cut off all aid to the Kurds in return for establishing the thalweg (line of deepest water) of the Shatt al-Arab as the new international boundary.(14) The Shah had realized a major goal, but one earned at the expense of the personal humiliation of Saddam Hussein.

Turning to the specific precipitants, we must examine the Islamic Revolution to understand the provocative and proximate causes of the war. More specifically, we must investigate the root causes of the revolution, the role of Khomeini, its effect on the Iranian armed forces, and most importantly the fear it struck in the hearts of the Iraqi leadership.

The collapse of the Shah's regime was initiated by popular resentment over the character and policies of the government. The primary reason for the Shah's downfall lay in the domestic realm. His promises of instant wealth attracted the masses both figuratively and literally. The poor migrated to the cities only to have their hopes and dreams repaid by a miserable slum existence. The remedy for the majority of the downtrodden was a return to the values of Islam.(15)

What the revolution lacked was a leader; however, the Shah's inept regime created one by blaming the Ayatollah for instigating the riots in the holy city of Qom in the early part of 1978.(16) Khomeini was eminently qualified to lead the revolution. In 1964 he joined the anti-government demonstrations and was expelled from Iran to Najaf, a Shia holy city in southern Iraq. Living piously and preaching Islamic values, Khomeini gained a reputation as a scholar.(17) It was here during his 14 years of exile that he was able to

observe the plight of his Iraqi Shiite brothers first hand. He came to regard the secular form of government of the Baath Regime as inappropriate for Muslims to live under.(18)

As the violence began to increase throughout the summer of 1978, the Ayatollah's importance as a symbol to the revolution increased significantly.(19) The Shah regarded him as so much of a threat that he enticed Saddam Hussein into expelling him from Iraq, a decision which would end up haunting Hussein. By January of 1979 the situation deteriorated so badly that the Shah fled the country. His departure was followed shortly thereafter by the return of Ayatollah from exile in Paris.

Khomeini's return to Iran was triumphal; however, his transition to power was far from smooth. Urban guerilla groups, both Islamic and Marxist-inspired, had taken to the streets with uncertain agendas, but they were not Khomeini's primary concern. His first concern was the consolidation of the revolution, and to that end he perceived the Shah's army to be the greatest threat. Khomeini countered this threat by creating his fanatical Revolutionary Guards and by purging the armed forces of its senior leadership. Within a space of months, Khomeini's henchmen eliminated over 250 generals (20), engendering a near total collapse of the armed forces. Iran for the most part was now defended by its untrained militia-- the Revolutionary Guard.

The most provocative cause for the war was Khomeini's rise to power since it upset the status quo, striking fear in the hearts of the Sunni leadership of Iraq. Khomeini's message was simple but powerful. It rejected the Baath concept of a national state and rested instead on the belief that the legitimacy of governments of Muslim peoples derived from their adherence to the tenets of Shia Islam.(21) The Ayatollah called upon his brother

Shiites across the border to rise up in revolt and crush their Sunni masters: "Wake up and topple this corrupt regime in your Islamic country before its too late." (22) He advised the Iraqi army, primarily composed of Shia enlisted to "not obey the orders of the foes of Islam, but join the people." (23)

The message did not consist of words alone. In April of 1980, an assassination attempt was made on the life of Iraq's Deputy Foreign Minister, Tareq Aziz. Additionally, evidence was produced which revealed that Iran was providing materiel support to radical Shiite opposition groups. (24)

The combination of these events produced a fear and uncertainty the Iraqi leadership had never encountered before, a fear which was exacerbated by the fact that they ruled a population comprised of 20% Kurd and 60% Shiite Arab. (25) So great was their fear of Iranian subversion, combined with the manifest inability of Khomeini to consolidate the revolution, that the Iraqi government chose war to protect itself from a perceived threat to its existence. (26)

MILITARY OVERVIEW

The actual sparks which ignited the Iraqi invasion were struck in late 1979. Iran escalated its anti-Baath campaign by resuming its support for the Iraqi Kurds.(27) This fighting was followed by a series of border clashes over the next 10 months as Iraq attempted to come to grips with Iran's subversive activities.

Before plunging into the actual events of the war, it is necessary to examine the military balance of power on the eve of the invasion. More specifically, to gain a clearer picture of both countries' projected capabilities one must survey the effects of politicization on the armed forces, their doctrine, and the forces themselves.

Khomeini's rise to power had a significantly negative impact on Iran's military effectiveness. The revolutionary purges of the military and the concomitant rise of the Revolutionary Guards shattered any semblance of unity of effort among Iran's armed forces. Control of the weakened regular army was in the hands of the much maligned President and Commander and Chief, Bani Sadr, while power over the Guards resided clearly with the clerics and the Ayatollah.(28) The purges of the new regime had the effect of replacing the army's U.S.-trained officer corps with revolutionary and Islamic officers,(29) the latter lacking the professional training and ability of the former.

On the other hand, Iran was not alone in the debilitating effects of politicization of the armed forces. The Iraqi leaders, who themselves had come to power in 1968 through a coup, consolidated their grip on the country by purging the high command of all but loyal Sunnis. Fear of a future coup resulted in tying military promotions primarily to political loyalty, often at the expense of professional competence. This led to a situation where Sunni and Takriti affiliations were the most important

criteria for advancement. Thus, for example, Saddam Hussein's half brother secured the job of Chief of Internal Security, while his cousin was appointed as Minister of Defense and Head of the Army.(30) Furthermore, elite army and air force units commanded by loyal Sunni officers were stationed in and around Baghdad and Tikrit to protect Hussein's regime from internal threats. Consequently, at the outbreak of hostilities Hussein possessed an unswervingly loyal high command with questionable military skills.

Doctrinally, both belligerents entered the war with their tactical operations rooted in the experiences of their last conflict. Iraq's inability to suppress small Kurdish guerrilla units coupled with her unwillingness to endure further large numbers of casualties led her to adopt a peculiar style of fighting. Preferred tactics involved locating the enemy force, sealing off its escape route, and then methodically using artillery and air power to disorganize the defense. Tanks and infantry would then advance slowly, occupying the ground the artillery and air had conquered.(31) It was a case of mechanized power defeating light forces.

Iran's approach to the 1980 invasion in part can be attributed to experiences gained in the Dhofar campaign in Oman between 1972 and 1975. Her superiority in weapons compared to the Dhofari rebels resulted in huge amounts of ammunition being expended as a substitute for more imaginative tactics.(32) Firepower was stressed above all else. This luxury, however, was short lived in her war with Iraq as arms embargoes dried up the supply of ammunition. With a void in tactical doctrine, and without the compensating leadership, the only recourse was to rely on massive manpower-- in the form of 'human wave' attacks.

As for the forces themselves, on the eve of battle the once proud Iranian Army could only be judged inferior to the Iraqis. Iran's Army had lost over 135,000 men through desertions and purges, and it could field only nine

under-strength US style divisions grouped into three field armies. In comparison, the Iraqi Army appeared quite strong with a total of over 200,000 men organized into 12 Soviet style divisions grouped into three corps.(33)

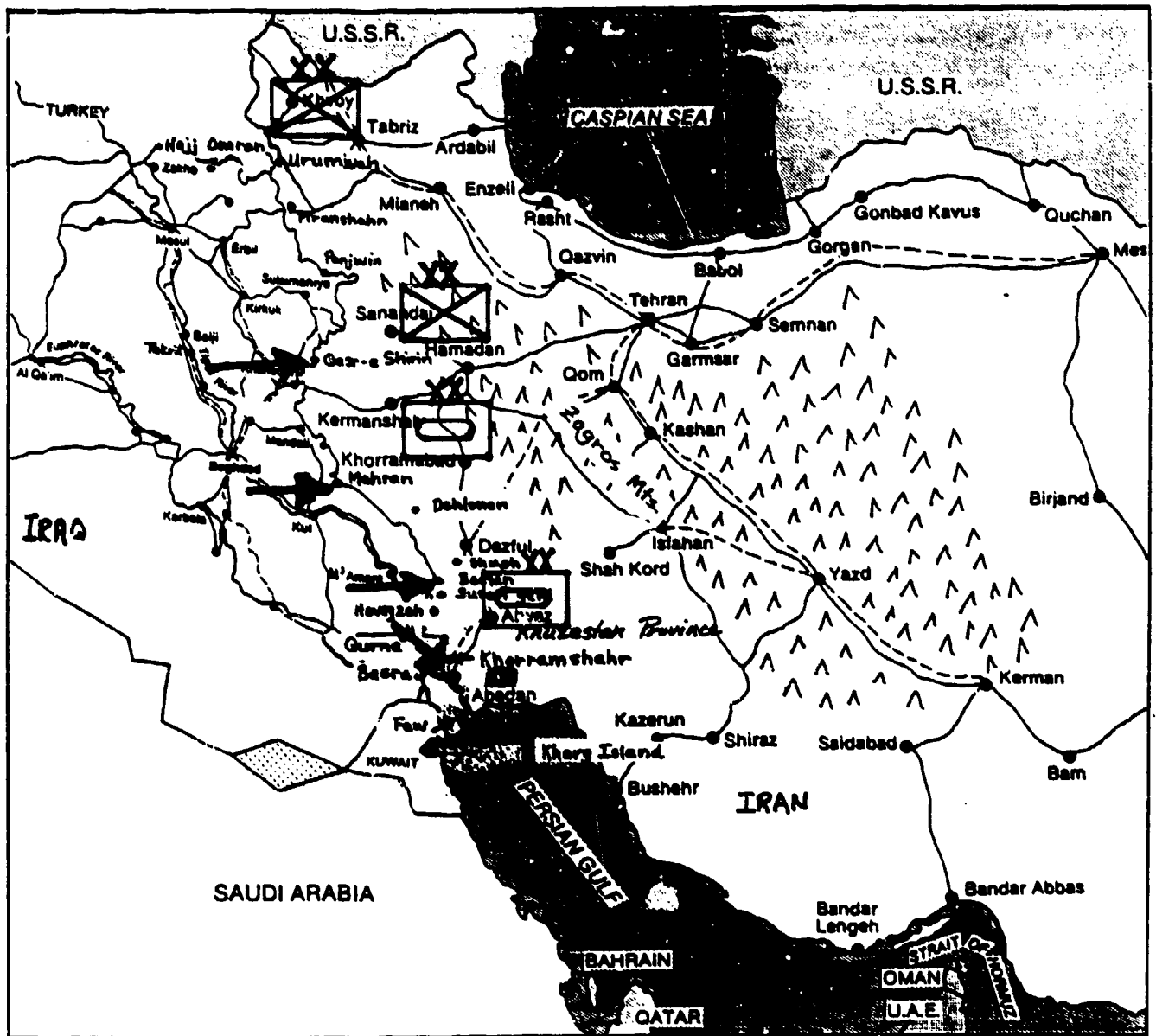
The Revolution had also upset the air balance. Iran's superiority in US aircraft, 445 versus 332, was degraded by the loss of pilots, mechanics, and spare parts sources. Furthermore, departing US advisers removed key avionic components from Iran's newest F-14's. Estimates made by Western analysts on the eve of the invasion indicated that only 18-50% of Iran's aircraft were operational.(34) On the other hand, Iraq was in the process of modernizing her fleet of Soviet aircraft and, in fact, had achieved an 80% operational rate by the start of the war. However, the Iraqi Air Force possessed a glaring deficiency -- it lacked reconnaissance aircraft, critical to all phases of an air war.(35)

At sea, Iran had a clear superiority. This can be traced to Iran's perception of herself as guardian of the Persian Gulf. Under the Shah, Tehran had built up a formidable armada. Although somewhat affected by the purges, she still crewed three destroyers, four frigates, four corvettes, and sixteen patrol boats. Iraq in comparison, with only 10 miles of coastline, manned only twelve patrol boats, a vulnerability that would cost her.

INVASION

Iran's day of infamy fell on the 22nd of September 1980 when Iraqi aircraft bombed Iranian airfields, attempting to gain air superiority over the Iranian Air Force. Iraq quickly followed this operation with three simultaneous ground thrusts across the Iranian border along a 700km front. The Iraqi main effort was designed to seize Khuzestan Province, hoping to entice its Arab population into defecting to the Pan-Arabic cause. All the while, the two secondary thrusts had as their objectives the securing of

INVASION



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Iran

IRAQI ATTACKS

➔ (10/23/80)

12A

BASE MAP: MAPS ON FILE

defensible terrain protecting Baghdad and cutting southern Iran off from the north. At sea, Iraq remained on the defense. Iran responded quickly to the Iraqi thrusts, rebuffing the threat in the air, destroying the threat at sea, and neutralizing the threat on the ground.

Hoping to achieve results reminiscent of Israel's 1967 preemptive air strike against Egypt, Iraq attacked ten Iranian military airfields on the 22nd of September. The Iraqi plan to achieve air superiority failed because Iraqi air doctrine required its pilots to bomb enemy runways instead of striking parked aircraft. Inexplicably, following the air force's failed mission, the Iraqi High Command dispersed its aircraft to bases in Jordan. Apparently, the Iraqi Air Force had lost faith in its ability to stand up to the Iranian Air Force. Iran did not fail to seize the opportunity, striking Baghdad and Iraq's critical oil facilities on the very next day.(36)

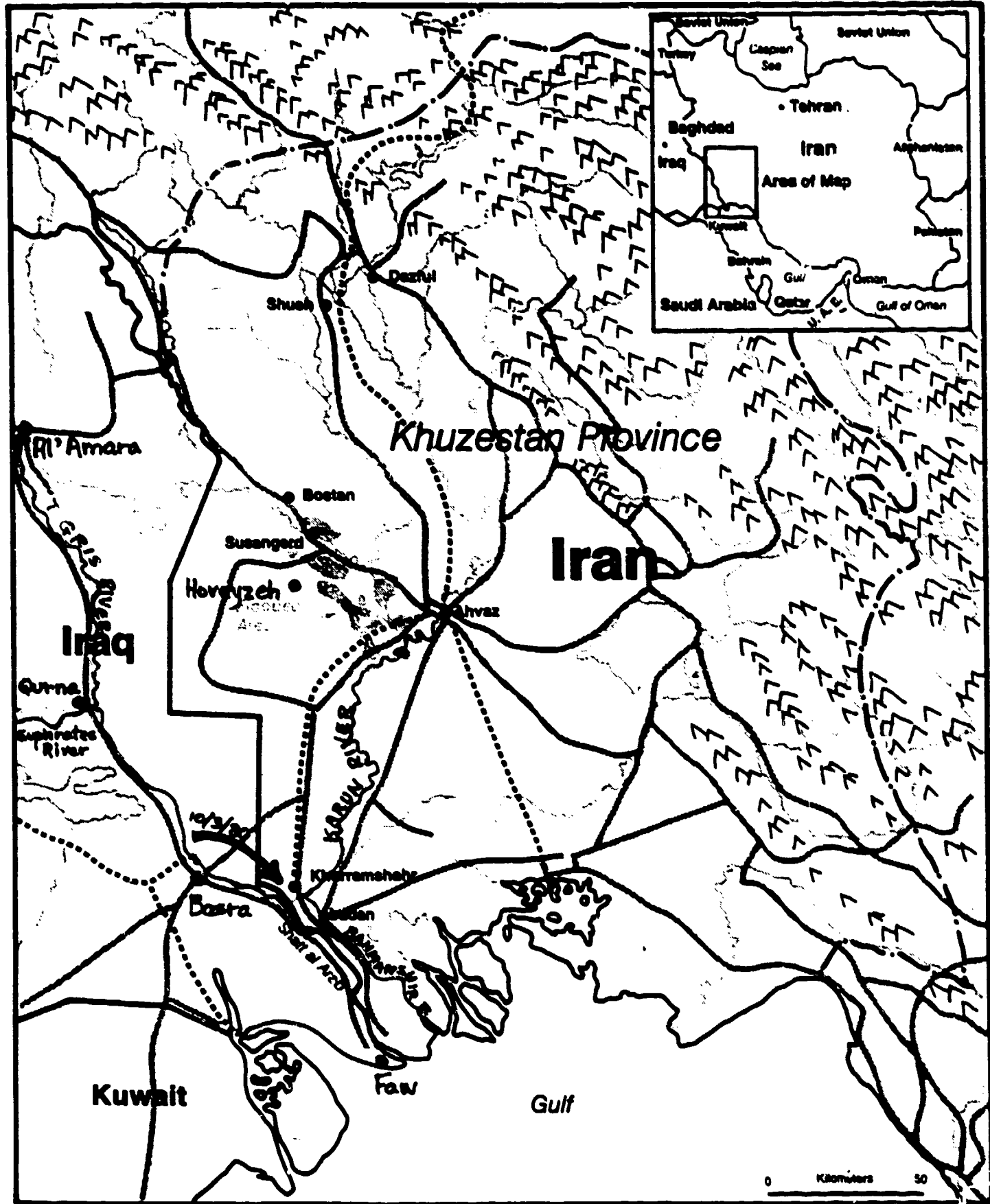
On the 23rd of September, six of Iraq's twelve divisions thrust across the Iranian border along a 700 km front. In the north, a mechanized division easily swept aside light Iranian resistance capturing its objective, Qasr-e Shirin. The fall of this outpost denied Iran a high speed approach to Iraq's heart, Baghdad. In the center, elements of another division quickly grabbed the city of Mehran, denying Iran access to its northern territory west of the Zagros Mountains (37) while in the south four Iraqi divisions (three armored and one mechanized) from III Corps invaded Khuzestan on two axes. The remaining Iraqi divisions secured the cities of Baghdad and Tikrit, and protected northern Iraq from the Kurds. In response, Iran deployed four of its nine under-strength divisions along the entire length of its border with Iraq. In the north, one infantry division was stationed at Urumiyeh while a second covered the Kurdish threat near Sanandaj. A third was an armored division near Kermanshah while the fourth, also an armored division, was stationed in Ahvaz. Its mission was to protect Khuzestan and shield Iran's

key air base at Dezful.(38) The remaining divisions were deployed around the country as pictured on Map 12A.

Hussein's army conducted its main effort on the Khuzestan front. Iraqi forces spread out, moving languidly towards their objectives: Susangerd, Dezful, and the critical communications hub of Ahvaz, the key to Khuzestan province. On the 25th and 26th of September, the Iraqi attack continued sweeping away light resistance. Iraqi tanks advanced in phases, with tanks providing cover while Japanese-made bulldozers and digging equipment carved out hull-down positions for subsequent bounds.(39) But the attack began to stall on the outskirts of the cities where the Revolutionary Guards stiffened, reserves were brought up, and the Iranian Air Force flew up to 150 close air support sorties per day from the 26th thru the 28th of September.(40) Iraqi forces rapidly turned to their tactical experiences of the Kurdish insurgency, substituting firepower for maneuver. The war quickly took on a World War I hue.

It was in this atmosphere that Saddam Hussein, on the 28th of September, declared that his territorial objectives had been met and that he was prepared to offer the Iranians cease fire terms.(41) Apparently his statements were mere propaganda since the Iraqi attack continued on the southern Khuzestan axis faring somewhat better but at a much higher cost. Proceeding without close air support but under heavy artillery support, a pure armored division reinforced with elements of a second looped around Basra, crossing the Shatt-al-Arab to attack the key oil refinery towns of Khorramshahr and Abadan. Iraqi armored forces then committed the unpardonable sin of entering into urban warfare without infantry support against a enemy they had underrated but found to be formidable. A mixture of Revolutionary Guards, naval cadets, regular forces, militia, and volunteers decimated the unsupported tanks with gasoline bombs and antitank weapons.

KHORRAMSHAHR THRUST



Map by A. Cordesman
 ELLSON

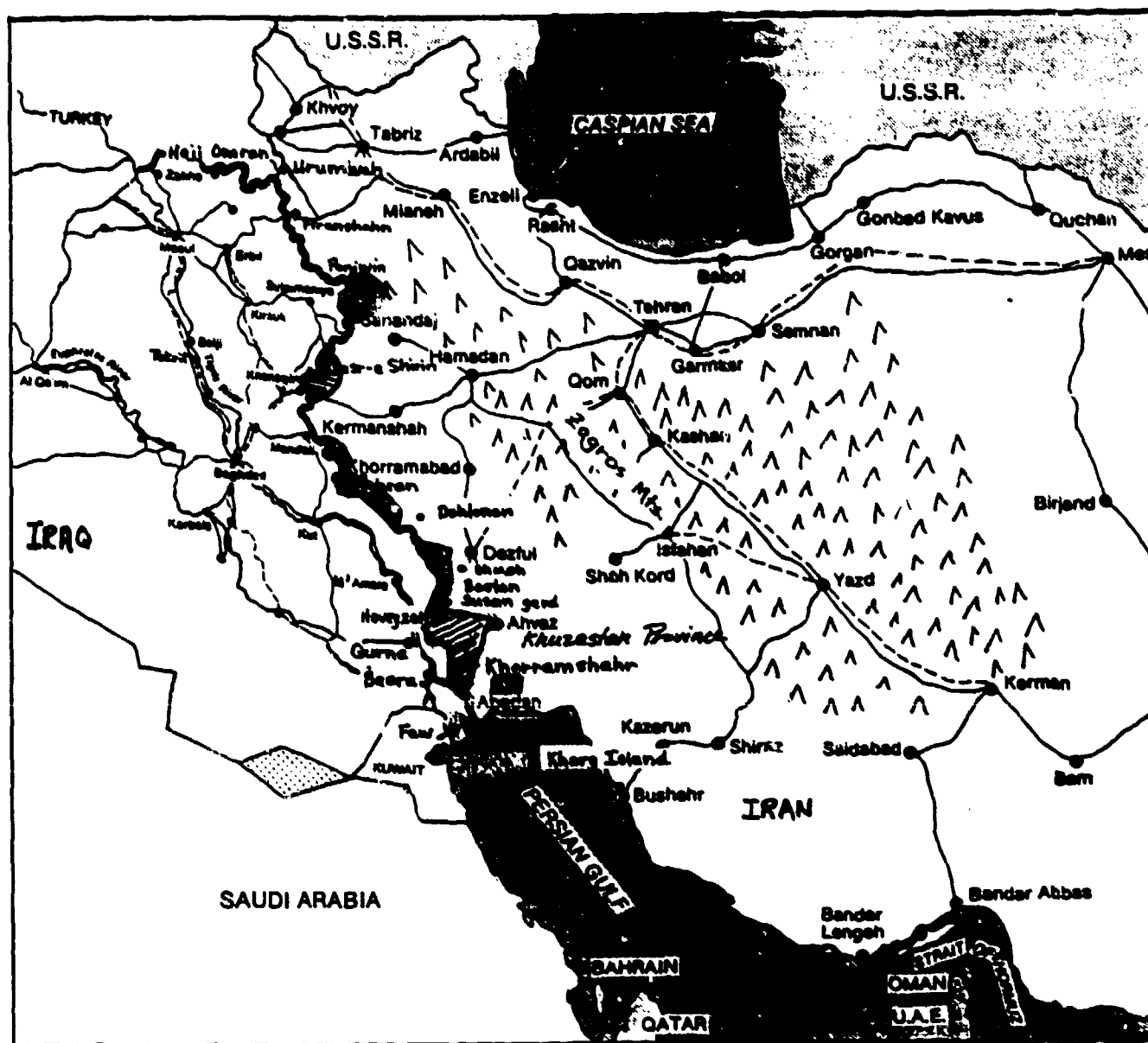
The city eventually fell on the 13th of October, but not before the Iraqis were forced to take an operational pause to train the Presidential Guard in urban warfare tactics. The price for capturing this lightly defended city was high, costing Hussein over 5,000 casualties from his elite Guard.(42)

Moreover, the impact of the Iraqi victory hastened the culminating point of Iraq's attack. Unwilling to take casualties at such a tremendous rate, Iraqi forces laid siege to Abadan, Khorramshahr's twin city to the south. Avoiding a direct route through the southern suburbs of Khorramshahr, Iraq put a pontoon bridge across the Karun River, enabling her troops to move down the east bank of the Bahmanshir River which forms the eastern boundary of Abadan Island.(43) Meanwhile, in order to assist in the reduction of this oil refinery town, the Iraqi High Command diverted forces away from the attack on the regular Iranian armored division defending the key city of Ahvaz.(44) Unable to encircle Abadan completely, Iraqi maneuver forces dug in while their artillery attempted to crush the resistance with firepower.

Fearing the consequences of excessive casualties and appearing to be happy with his territorial gains, Hussein halted his attack. By the middle of November 1980 the front followed the Kharkheh river west of Dezful to the Karun and the east bank of the Bahmanshir Rivers.(45) Iran responded by shipping over 200,000 untrained Revolutionary Guards and other volunteers to the front to bolster its defenses.(46) These replacement transformed the war again into a WW I style face off complete with entrenched positions and massive artillery bombardments.

In the air war, close air support was the exception rather than the rule as both air forces increasingly turned their attention towards counter value targets (i.e. oil terminals, cities, tankers) to the exclusion of all others. Air strategy began to follow Giulio Douhet's air power theories by focusing on the destruction of the enemies' economic infrastructure through the use of

LIMIT OF ADVANCE



0 100
KMS
Iraq

0 200
KMS
Iran



Iraqi Occupied
AREAS

ISA

BASE MAP FROM: MAPS
ON FILE

air power. On the 23rd of September 1980, Iranian aircraft inflicted heavy damage on Basra's oil refinery, succeeding in cutting the Iraqi oil pipeline through Turkey. Meanwhile, Iraqi fighters launched the first of many attacks on Iran's largest oil exporting facility at Kharg Island. By early 1981, these attacks had cut oil exports from both Iran and Iraq to about 600,000 barrels each per day, compared to their prewar totals of 3.5 million and 1.4 million barrels per day, respectively.(47) This was a phenomenon which, if not halted, significantly would affect both sides' abilities to purchase weapons, ammunition, and spare parts, and, in theory, would end the war.

At sea Iran's victory was swift, complete, and far reaching. On the 27th of September 1980, Iranian warships struck swiftly, destroying Iraq's two main oil terminals at Khor al-Amaja and Mina al Bakr.(48) The Iraqi Navy attempted to parry the blow, but the efforts cost her the fleet. Iraq emerged from the naval engagement with nothing but her pipeline to the West. Her ports were closed, a billion dollar per month foreign exchange was lost, 66 ships were trapped in the Shatt-al-Arab, and Iraq was unable to stop Iran from supplying almost encircled Abadan.(49) From a strategic perspective Iraq's naval defeat reverberated even further. Iraq's inability to export sufficient quantities of oil forced her to rely on Saudi Arabia and other Arab states for much needed cash to buy weapons and ammunition. The assistance came with strings attached in the form of limitations placed upon future Iraqi operations.

STALEMATE: December 1980- August 1981

By December 1980 the pattern of the war resembled two fighters recovering their breath from the first round while bracing for the next. Iraq undertook actions to fortify her newly won territories. On the other hand, Iran, reeling from an internal power struggle, launched an ill-fated attack towards Susangerd resulting in the fall of its moderate leader in Teheran, Bani Sadr.

But on the whole Iran used this operational lull to gather her strength in preparation for regaining her lost territory.

On the 7th of December 1980, Hussein announced that Iraq was going over to the defensive. In reality, Iraqi forces had assumed the operational defensive immediately after their failure to capture Abadan. Thereafter, the two warring nations settled into a static war for the next nine months. Iraq was content to defend her occupied territories while Iran, smarting from her losses, prepared for battle. Iran took advantage of the operational pause to hurry forces to the front and to flood low lying Khuzestan Province. The inundation of the low areas cut the Iraqi main supply routes, isolating the front line units from the rear. Iraq countered by building causeways to resupply her forward forces.

However, this period was not without military activity. In December, an Iraqi mountain division launched an attack in the vicinity of Panjwin, ostensibly to secure the Kirkuk oil fields. In January, Iran undertook a major operation to relieve the city of Susangerd.

The Susangerd offensive is interesting. When Clausewitz said that "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means,"(50) he was referring to state policy as it pertained to interests in the international environment. Bani Sadr, whose position with the clerics was severely strained, calculated that a military victory would help him consolidate his internal power, not quite what Clausewitz had in mind. Therefore, on the 5th of January, he ordered three under-strength regular armored brigades to assault the Iraqi forces on the outskirts of Susangerd. The attack went forward without infantry support, penetrating almost to the city of Hoveyze before being halted by Iraqi forces. The Iranians' failure to rupture the Iraqi line lay more in their own shortcomings rather than in Iraqi brilliance. Iran's inability to resupply her forces, coupled with her unsupported armor thrust,

doomed Bani Sadr's attack. Over the course of this battle, Iraq apparently destroyed over 40 tanks and captured another 100 tanks which had been abandoned after running out of fuel.(51) The roots of this fiasco stemmed from Iran's internal power struggle between Bani Sadr's moderates and the clerics, a struggle which in turn contributed to mismanagement of the battle. Iran's failure did produce some positive spinoffs. In July Bani Sadr fled the country to avoid being purged, and with his departure, Khomeini established the Revolutionary Defense Council, the first step toward unity in Iran's war effort.(52)

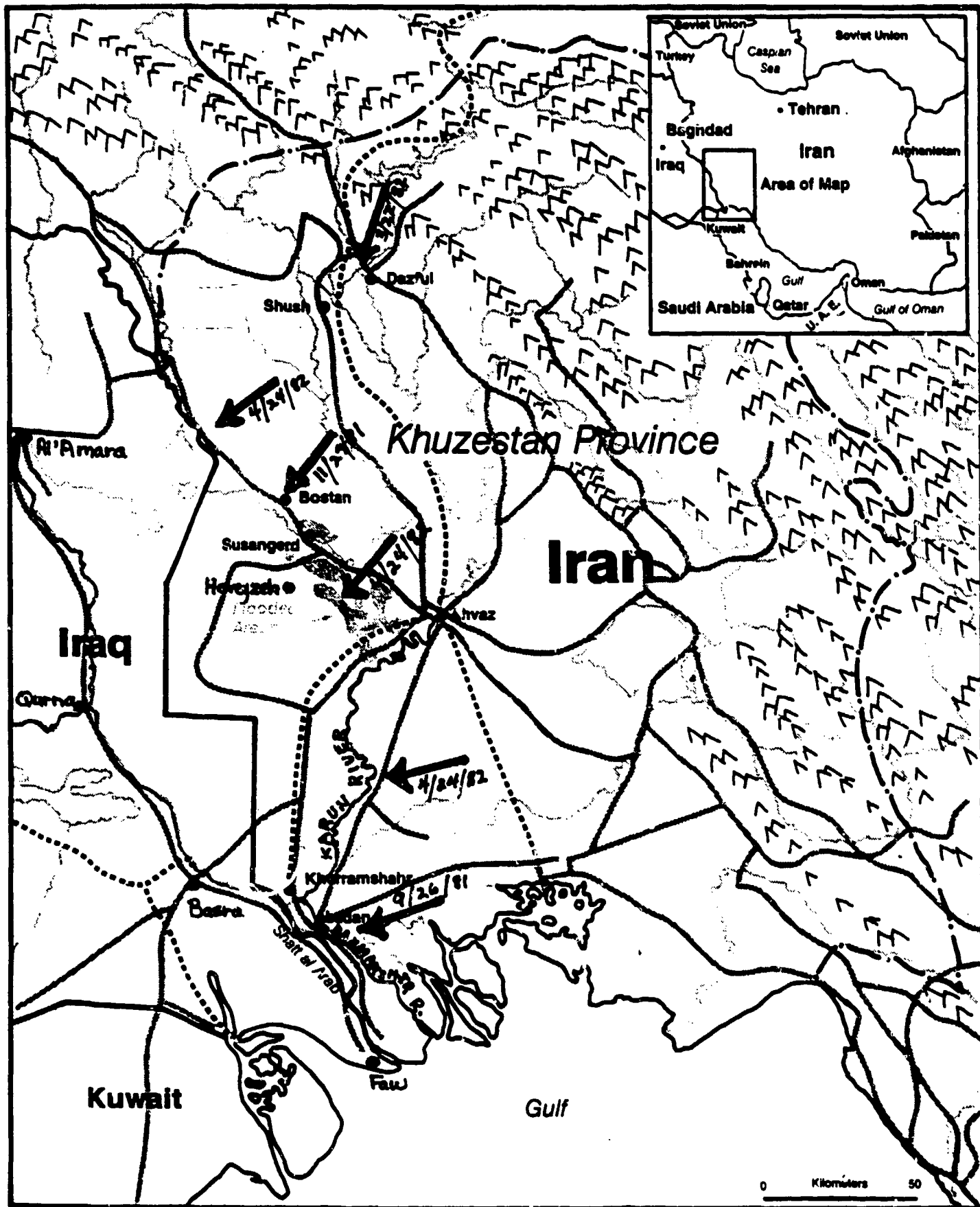
IRANIAN COUNTEROFFENSIVE: September 1981- June 1982

In September 1981 the Revolutionary Defense Council, its peace overtures having been rejected, quickly exerted its new authority, ordering its forces to recapture lost Iranian territory. To this end, Iran launched a series of major operations over the next ten months. These operations, furious in their execution, decimated numerous Iraqi divisions, compelling Hussein to withdraw his forces back to Iraq.

In early September Iran asked the Islamic nations to revive their efforts to terminate the war through diplomatic means. Iranian leaders were willing to negotiate an end to the war if Iraq removed her forces from Iranian soil.(53) Iraq, however, was unwilling to sacrifice her hard won territorial gains without a commitment from Iran to terminate her subversive activities.

Iran countered Iraq's refusal to negotiate with battle. On the 26th of September two Iranian infantry divisions with supporting armor and artillery, attacked Iraqi positions along the Bahmanshir River side of Abadan Island.(54) Iranian infantry infiltrated Iraqi battle positions, forcing them to withdraw behind the Karun River, thus lifting the siege of Abadan.

IRANIAN COUNTEROFFENSIVE



Map by Cordesman;
Ellison

Both sides fought well, but the Iranian infantry's willingness to die in frontal assaults carried the day.(55) Again, Iran's 'human wave' assaults were necessitated by shortages of spare parts and ammunition.(56) Manpower was a resource Tehran could afford to expand, much more so than equipment and bullets, and expend them she did.

Following the Abadan success Iran switched her operations over 150 kms to the north. Apparently, Iran was more concerned with regaining territory than following up on the victory in the south. On the 29th of November, Iranian forces launched operation 'Jerusalem Way' in the vicinity of Bostan-Susange, recapturing Bostan, again by using 'human wave' tactics. The reoccupation of Bostan exacerbated Iraq's logistical problems, compelling Iraq to shift her lines of supply far to the south for her forces in the Ahvaz area.(57)

The war returned to its static form in December with the beginning of the winter rains until the inactivity was broken in mid-March when Iraq's Deputy Premier declared that Iraq was prepared to withdraw from Iranian territory, once negotiations had begun and showed satisfactory progress.(58) Iran's reply came in the form of the largest operation to date in the war.

On the 22nd of March Iran kicked off Operation 'Undeniable Victory', switching its operational direction from Bostan 80 kms north to the Shush-Dezful area. Iran attacked with four division equivalents, including some 30,000 Revolutionary Guards. The Iraqis countered with the Fourth Army, consisting of two armored and one mechanized divisions,(59) while the Iraqi Air Force generated over 150 sorties in support of the ground operations. All the while, Iran kept its 70-90 operational fighters on the ground.(60) This operation proved to be Iran's most successful to date. Iranian 'human waves' decimated three Iraqi divisions and forced them back to the border. Iraq was forced to take desperate measures to stem the Iranian onslaught.

Hussein ordered foreign workers and children to the front to buttress the front lines.(61)

Iran followed its success in the north with Operation 'Jerusalem' on the 24th of April. This operation was launched on a 300 km front extending from Al'Amarah in the north to Khorramshahr in the south. Iraqi forces in the vicinity of Ahvaz crumbled, and Iranian forces quickly established a bridgehead over the west bank of the Karun River. Meanwhile, over 70,000 Iranians attacked Khorramshahr, threatening the defenders with encirclement. These setbacks forced Saddam Hussein to take drastic action. Unwilling to lose any more men, Hussein ordered the withdrawal of the two divisions defending Khorramshahr, leaving behind a large quantity of equipment and, reportedly, 12,000 prisoners.(62)

STALEMATE, IRAN ON THE OPERATIONAL OFFENSIVE

July 1982-February 1984

By July of 1982 the war underwent another fundamental change. Hussein expanded his army and prepared the nation for a long war. Iraqi ground actions were limited to purely defensive operations while her air effort attempted to destroy the Iranian economic infrastructure as a poor substitute for her ground actions. Iran, having regained her lost territory, decided to invade Iraq. However, Iran's operational focus was far from clear as she launched major operations up and down the frontier as if looking for a weak spot in Iraqi defenses.

After 22 months of war Saddam Hussein understood that he could not win a war of attrition with Iran. All Hussein had to show for his efforts was 50,000 dead, nearly 50,000 Iraqi POW's, a disrupted economy, the loss of over \$100 billion in oil facilities and revenues, and a Shiite population far more vulnerable to Khomeini's subversion than when the war began.(63) His hope of

enticing the Shiite Arabs (Iranians) of Khuzestan Province to revolt against Khomeini had vanished. The only positive outcome for Hussein was his continuation in power.

To secure his rule, Hussein appears to have embarked in mid-June 1982 upon a strategy of exhaustion. At one end of the spectrum, Hussein envisioned accepting battle on the ground in a defensive posture, while at the other end he planned to use his overwhelming air superiority to attack Iran's infrastructure. The Iraqi leader, it appears, hoped that the air war would exhaust Iran materially over time.

On the 20th of June 1982, as the first phase of his new strategy, Hussein announced that all Iraqi troops would be withdrawn from Iranian territory. He still hoped that this gesture would entice the Iranians to the bargaining table. The ploy failed to move the Iranians who were experiencing the euphoria of a perceived victory over the infidels. The Iraqis, however, had not failed to make preparations for this possibility. In the fall of 1981, Hussein, having envisioned such circumstances, ordered the construction of an extensive defensive line, consisting of earthen walls, outposts, and firing positions along the entire frontier. Additionally, he doubled the size of the army from 12 to 20 divisions. The Iraqi High Command immediately deployed this enlarged force behind its new fortified front. III Corps, comprised of eight divisions, defended the southern sector in the vicinity of Basra, three divisions were deployed along the critical central sector defending Baghdad, and two divisions defended the northern front. The remainder were held in strategic reserve.(64)

The decision to expand the war clearly lay with the Iranians now. Following Hussein's announcement of withdrawal an acrimonious debate took place among the Iranian power elites over whether to invade Iraq. The

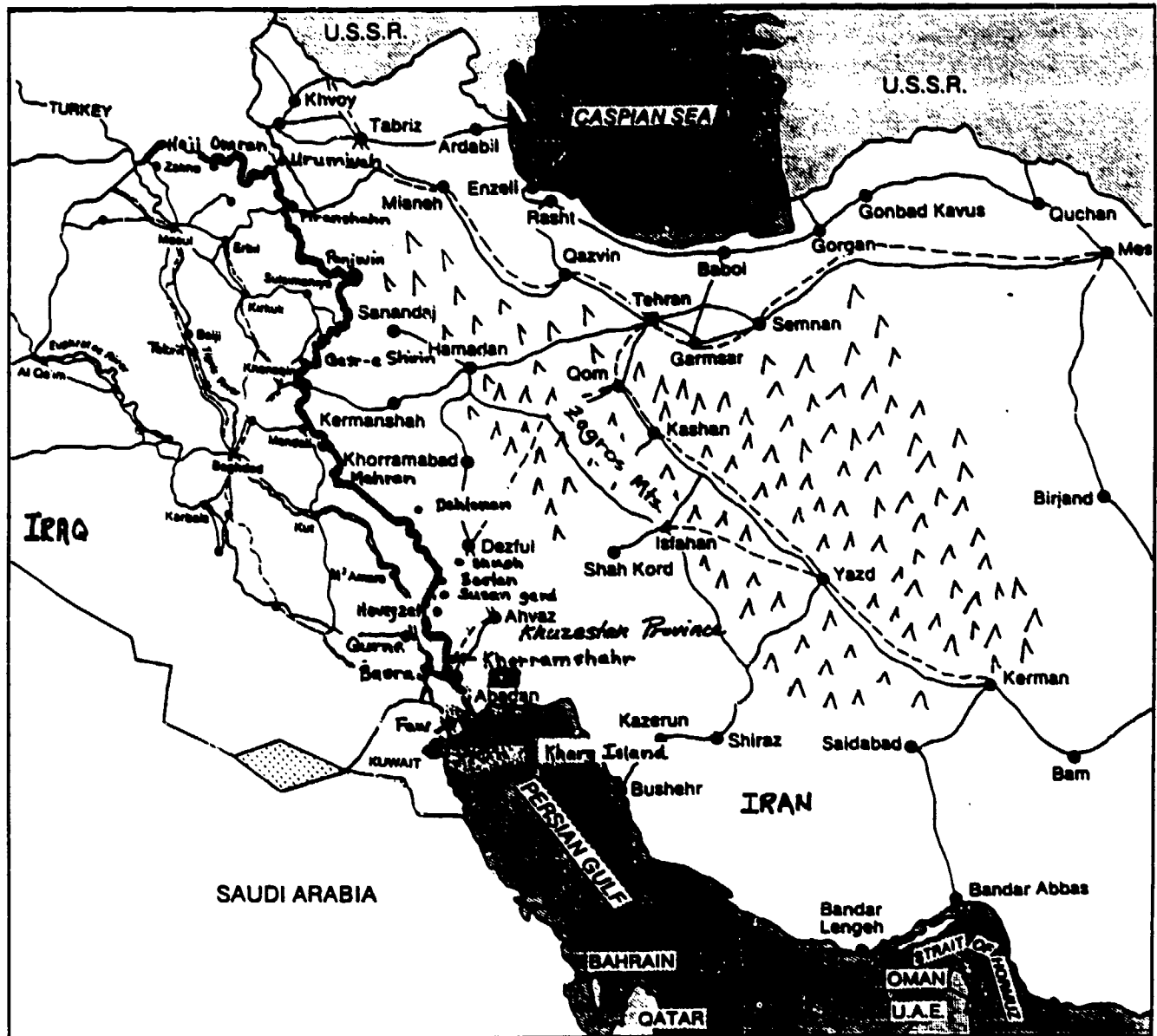
argument in favour of invasion, which won out, seems to have been a combination of ideology, vindictiveness, and revolutionary hubris.(65)

Thereafter, Khomeini dismissed Iraq's offer as "too late" and escalated his war aims to not only include the overthrow of Hussein but also \$150 billion in reparations.(66)

On the 13th of July 1982, Khomeini's Jihad entered into a new phase-- the invasion of Iraq. Four regular divisions preceded by 50,000 Revolutionary Guards (Operation 'Ramadan') thrust toward the Iraqi city of Basra from the northeast. The Iranian 'human wave' assault broke against Iraq's fortified defenses and was repulsed when Iraqi artillery began firing tear gas and high explosive ammunition. However, the fervor of the Guards attack did not waver until its fifth consecutive attack some 9 days later. For all its efforts, Iran gained a worthless strip of marsh land north of Basra about 1-2 miles wide and 10 miles long. It cost Iran 27,000 lives!(67)

There are many reasons for the Iranian disaster. Iran could no longer muster many of her tanks, artillery pieces, and combat aircraft imperative for combined arms warfare. The store of war materiel had dissipated from attrition, arms embargoes, and loss of oil revenues. As a result Iran turned even more to the one resource she possessed in abundance--manpower. Once again, Iran substituted 'human wave' attacks for combined arms warfare, displaying an utter disregard for human life. The impact of this switch was profound. The Revolutionary Guards had become the backbone of Iranian attacks, and the regular army reduced its participation to the lowest level possible.(68) Iran's operational mobility, to a great extent, was now limited to the speed of her foot soldiers. Additionally in a major disconnect, Khomeini released his surviving veterans as a reward for expelling the infidels from Iran. This was a major relief for the veteran soldiers, but a heavy loss for the country.

STALEMATE



IRANIAN ATTACKS

Basra

7/13/82

2/83

2/84

3/84

Mandali

9/30/82

Dezful

11/82

Iranshahr

7/83

Panjwin

10/83

Mehran

8/83

In early August, Hussein activated the other arm of his exhaustion strategy. The Iraqi Air Force intensified its efforts, striking oil facilities, ports, tankers, and ships sailing into and out of Iran. Additionally, Iraq launched a series of air strikes against Iran's main oil exporting terminal at Kharg Island. These strikes had the impact of reducing Iran's oil exports from a high of 5.2 million barrels per day (MMBD) in 1978 to 1.7 MMBD in 1983.(69) Iraq's ability to strike Iran with impunity can be attributed to Iran's difficulties in keeping her 90 combat aircraft operational.

On the ground Iran launched two more major operation similar to Operation 'Ramadan'. On the 30th of September, Iran shifted her operational focus 430 kms northward to Mandali. Operation 'Ibn Aqil' scored significant gains near the border south of Qasr-e Shirin, but failed to break the Iraqi line. In November, Iran launched Operation 'Muharram' west of Dezful, making very little progress.(70)

During 1983, Iran continued to employ the same tactics as in Operation 'Ramadan', this time shifting her operational focus up and down the frontier as if she were probing for a vulnerable point in the Iraqi defense. In February, Operation 'Behold the Dawn I' was launched in the vicinity of Basra, resulting in minimal gains. In July, Iran shifted the focus over 720 kms north to Piranshahr. 'Behold the Dawn II' managed to secure the key base of Hajj Omran but lacked the logistics capability to mount a sustained offensive across difficult mountainous terrain.(71) In August Iran again shifted operations 400 kms south to an area west of Mehran. Again, the Iranians achieved moderate gains, as usual, at the expense of large numbers of casualties. It is interesting to note that during this battle, Iraq counterattacked with armored forces for the first time in 12 months. This Iraqi "flashing sword of vengeance" was dulled by a lack of combined arms

tactics and suffered defeat on the Iranian defensive line.(72) In October, Iran again moved the focus 260 kms north to the village of Panjwin. The results were similar.

As the war moved into 1984, Iran modified her operational thrust but retained her old tactics. Iraq, on the other hand, retained her operational approach but intensified her tactics by employing mustard gas to stem the Iranian hordes.

By early February, Iran had amassed a sizable force of over 300,000 along the frontier running from Mehran in the north to Dehlonan in the south. These forces were poised to take part in Operations 'Dawn V and VI' which had as their aim Basra. Taking this city would result in the cutting off of a sizable population center and control of one-sixth of Iraq's proven oil reserves. The Iranians attacked along the 170km front cutting the Baghdad-Basra road temporarily, but the attack failed for a lack of combined arms tactics. The Iraqi government televised coverage revealing the carnage along the edges of water barriers and entrenched forward positions. Western sources estimated that Iran suffered seven times more casualties than Iraq and lost upwards of 13,000 men during two weeks of battle.(73)

Throughout March Iran continued to push her forces towards Basra, capturing a few insignificant islands north of the city. During these engagements Iranian field commanders continued to push units forward, attempting to counter minefields and barbed wire with human masses. The results were appalling. During 'Dawn V and VI', Iran lost over 40,000 casualties versus a maximum of 2,000 for Iraq.(74)

TANKER WAR: INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE CONFLICT

March 1984-December 1984

In 1984 the war shifted away from the battlefields to the vital oil shipping lanes of the Persian Gulf. Iraq, having long since tired of the futile war, embarked upon a new strategy which she hoped would compel Iran to settle the conflict at the bargaining table. Iraq undertook actions which she believed would draw the US into the conflict, compelling Iran to settle the war peacefully. Iran countered by striking Iraq's financial supporters, hoping to curtail their support of Iraq.

On the 27th of March, Iraq's newly acquired French Super Etendard fighter-bombers struck two small foreign-owned oil tankers south of Kharg Island with Exocet missiles. By this action, Iraq hoped to provoke Iran into an extreme reaction, such as attempting to close the Strait of Hormuz. Hussein apparently reasoned that such a move on Iran's part would draw the United States into the region, thus helping to bring about a peaceful settlement of the war.(75)

Hussein's logic was not far from right since the US did warn Iran of the dire consequences of closing the Strait. What doomed Iraq's strategy was her failure to concentrate her air power in time and space. Over the next 10 months, Iraq averaged only 4 strikes per month on international shipping and Iranian oil terminals. These air strikes inflicted considerable damage to the Kharg Island oil facility, weakening Iran's economy. However, the Iraqi Air Force's sporadic approach to attacking foreign tankers failed to halt Iran's shipment of oil to the outside world. Iran countered Iraq's strategy by simply acquiring a small fleet of shuttle tankers to move oil from Kharg Island to the south Gulf. By moving the oil in this manner, Iran's small shuttle tankers could tranship oil to foreign super tankers in the relative

safety of southern Gulf. Thus, the foreign tankers were spared the perilous journey up the Gulf to Kharg Island.

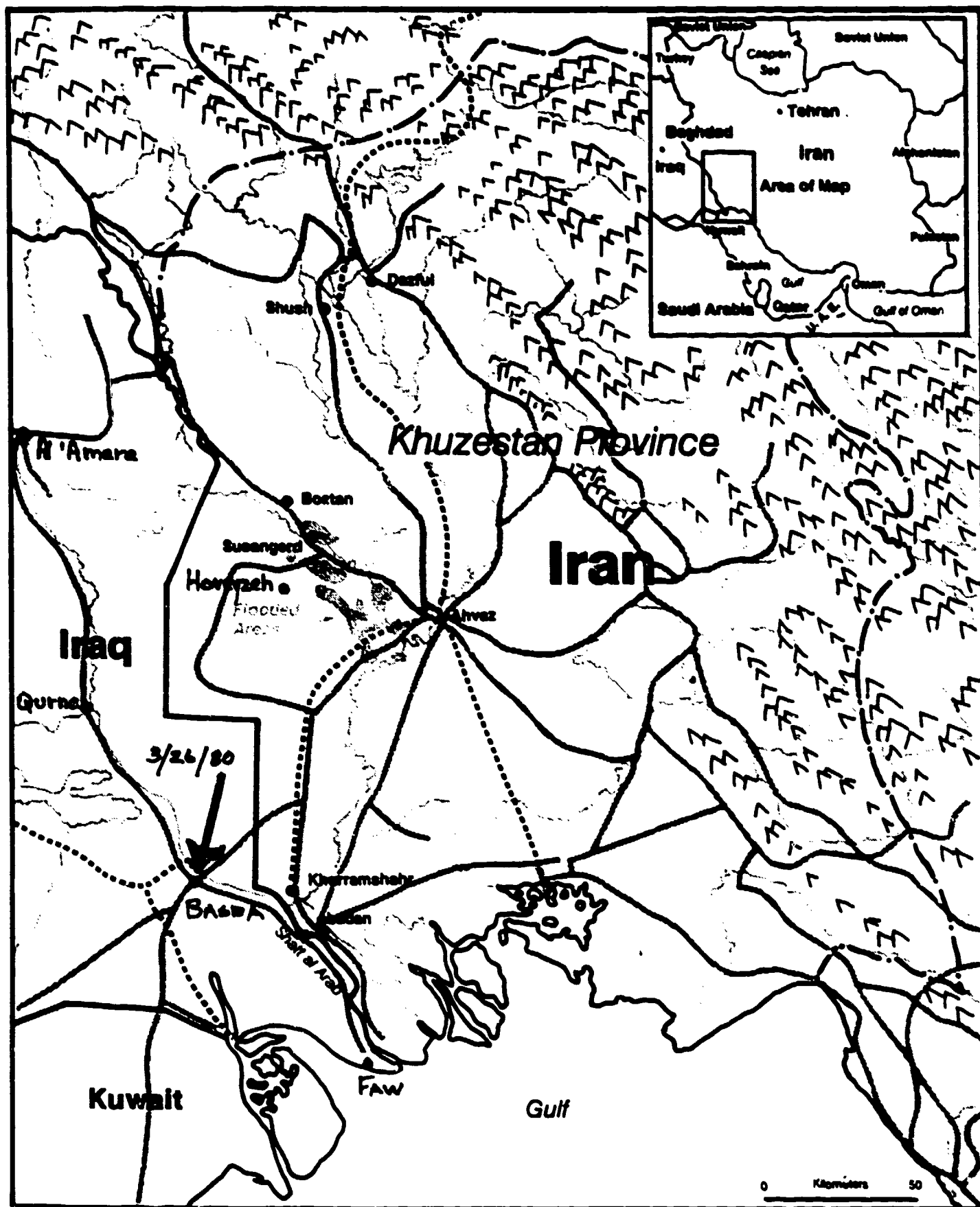
Meanwhile, Iran did not sit by idly while Iraq struck the targets so vital to the support of her war effort. Iran retaliated by striking oil tankers owned by Iraq's financial supporters. On the 26th of April, Iran hit a large Saudi owned tanker. She followed this strike up with an attack on a Kuwaiti tanker near Bahrain on the 13th of May.(76) In all, throughout the remainder of 1984, Iran struck 17 international targets, mostly Saudi and Kuwaiti tankers.(77) By focusing her attacks on these two Sunni Arab states, Iran hoped to coerce them into curtailing their support for Iraq. The strategy failed.

However, the Iraqi strategy to draw the US into the Gulf did work to a limited degree. In June, the US introduced airborne warning and control system aircraft (AWACS) and air refueling tankers into the region to assist the Saudis in limiting the tanker war in the northern Gulf.(78) This operation would serve as the precursor to the introduction of US warships into the Gulf in response to continued Iranian attacks on Kuwaiti tankers in 1987.

STALEMATE: January 1985-January 1986

As the war moved into the latter part of 1984, Iran shifted her tactical approach from frontal assault to infiltration. The strain of suffering enormous casualties during mass 'human wave' assaults apparently engendered a need for change. Iran took advantage of the lull in ground combat to reorganize her infantry forces, training them to conduct more orderly and better structured mass attacks.(79) Iranian ground operations during this phase of the war were limited, focusing primarily on Basra. The majority of the fighting took place in the air and sea as both sides continued to attempt to disrupt the other's economy.

STALEMATE , 1985 - 86



Map by Cordesman;
Ellison

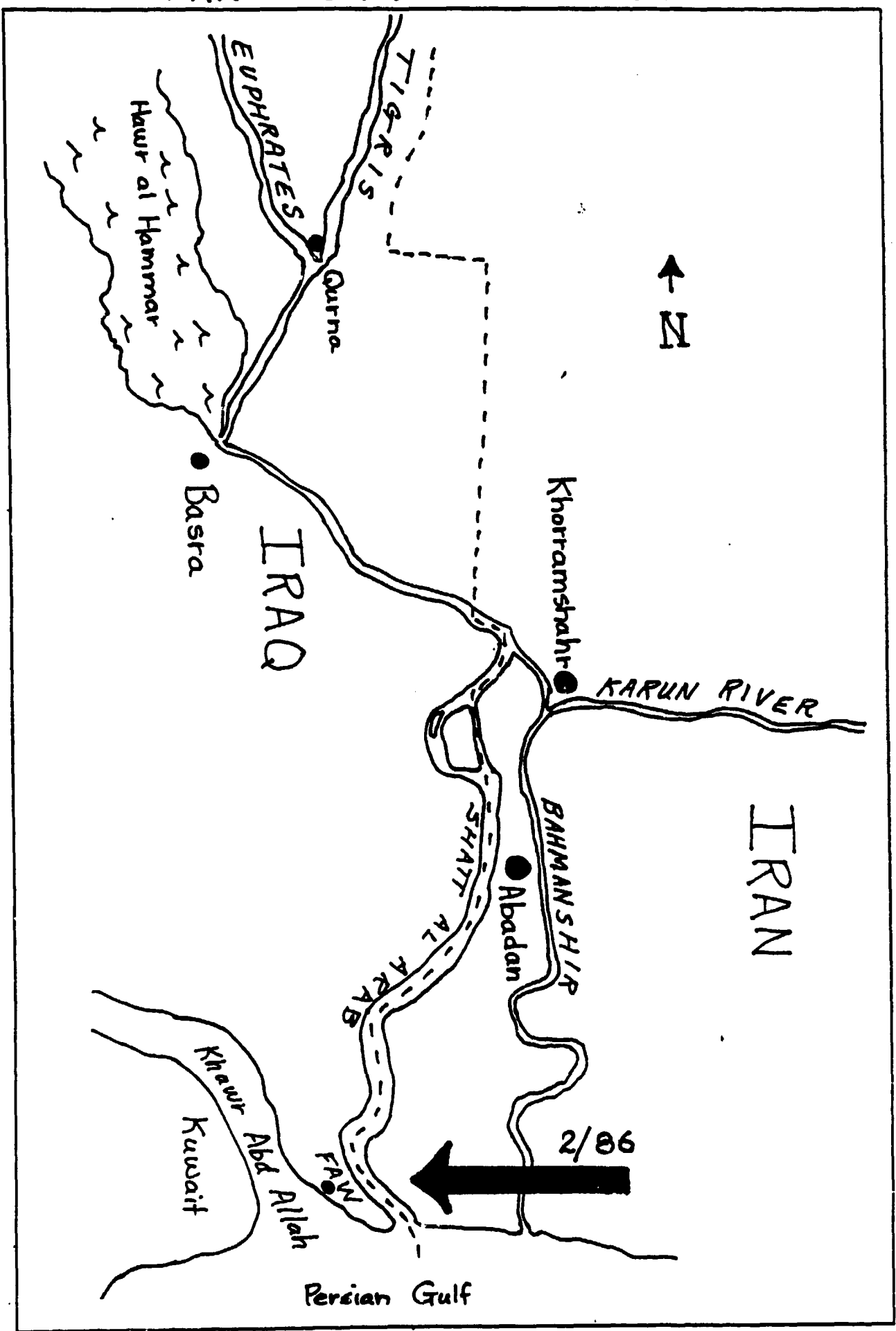
On 11 March, Iran launched her first major offensive of the year towards Basra. Employing her new tactics, Iran thrust seven divisions north of Qurna, hoping to cut Basra off from the remainder of Iraq. Iran's infiltration tactics worked superbly in the marshy areas north of Basra, forcing the Iraqis back to the Basra/Baghdad highway near Qurna. Iraq counterattacked successfully, throwing the Iranians back to the border. Both sides suffered heavily with Iraq losing upwards of 12,000 men while Iran lost close to 20,000. The net effect of this operation was that it convinced both sides of the correctness of their tactics.(80) However, even though the Iraqis were successful, their population base could not afford a large number of these "victories". Apparently, this situation led the Iraqi High Command to employ chemical weapons in the latter stages of the battle which resulted in the deaths of a sizable portion of Iran's 20,000 killed.(81)

The remainder of the fighting in 1985 took place in the air and the sea. From August through December, Iraq pounded Kharg Island with over 60 air strikes.(82) Again, Iraq was attempting to substitute air power for her poor showing on the ground war. Iran responded by harassing foreign shipping in the Gulf with its Navy. By September of 1985, a total of more than 130 ships had been attacked by both sides since early 1984.(83)

FAW COUNTEROFFENSIVE: February 1986

In February, Iran undertook operations to break the deadlock. Iran launched 'Dawn VIII', its most ambitious and daring operation to date. Iran's cross waterway invasion was designed to envelop Basra from the south and to put direct pressure on Kuwait. This operation employed infiltration tactics and a modicum of deception which most likely was the real arbiter of her success. Iran achieved tactical and operational surprise, forcing Iraq to move reserves to the Faw area in order to halt the Iranian threat.

FAW COUNTEROFFENSIVE



BORDER -----

NOT TO SCALE

On the 9th of February, Iran thrust 150,000 men across the border in two directions. A fixing attack took place near Basra, tying down the preponderance of the Iraqi forces in the south while the main effort made an amphibious crossing of the Shatt-al-Arab near Faw in recreational speed boats. Six Revolutionary Guard (RG) divisions, five independent RG brigades, and four regular army regiments (84) crossed the waterway at separate sites under the cover of darkness. Iraq's heavily mechanized forces could not handle these multiple threats. Nor had they anticipated Iran's ability to infiltrate over water barriers. The surprise resulted in a panicky withdrawal abandoning Faw to Iran.(85)

The loss of Faw sent shock waves reverberating around the Gulf. Kuwait lay exposed just across the Khawr Abd Allah waterway, while the way to Basra lay open from the south.

Iraq attempted to stem the Iranian attack with air power, generating upwards of several hundred sorties a day. The results of this operation were mixed. Iraq claims to have killed 350 Iranian soldiers per day while Iran, on the other hand, claims to have shot down roughly 7 Iraqi fighters during the same time period.(86) But when the dust settled, Tehran was still keeping her 25,000 infantrymen on the Faw Peninsula supplied, thus demonstrating the inability of Iraq's Air Force to destroy the critical bridges over the Shatt-al-Arab. However, Iraq used the time bought by the air strikes to transfer large numbers of mechanized reserves to Faw, using this heavily mechanized force to launch a three pronged counterattack down the peninsula, slowly crushing the Iranian light infantry with methodical tactics of multiple rocket launcher barrages followed by the rush of infantry and tanks.

As the fighting collapsed on marshy area surrounding Faw, the Iranian defenses stiffened. Iranian artillery was able to support its infantry, halting Iraq's counterattack on the outskirts of Faw. The Iraqi forces

quickly established strong defensive positions, and the war regained its static form.

Iran managed to retain some 120 square miles of the Faw Peninsula even in the face of Iraqi air superiority. But her efforts to achieve a strategic victory were negated due to the lack of combined arms capabilities and her failure to provide an operational reserve.

POST FAW

The remainder of the war is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, as of this writing it still remains essentially a static war reminiscent of WW I. Iraq continues to use air power and chemical weapons as a poor substitute for her ineffectual ground operations. The "Tanker War" has increased in size and intensity with the US taking on an active role as the protector of Iraq's financial supporters. On the other hand, Iran has continued to flip flop between the use of massive frontal assaults and infiltration attacks hoping to find a weak point on the Iraqi frontier. In the Gulf Iran has been placed on the horns of a dilemma. How does she continue to harass Gulf shipping without drawing the US further into the conflict? For the Iranians the war remains essentially religious in its overtones and until something or someone changes that the war will drag on with no end in sight.

The (Mis) Application of Operational Art

I. The relation of political objectives to operational campaigns.

Let us begin our analysis of the Iran-Iraq war by examining the relationship between political objectives and military means. Perhaps one of the most quoted phrases of military theory can be attributed to Carl von Clausewitz who posited that "war is merely a continuation of policy by other means."⁽⁸⁷⁾ On the surface this maxim seems simplistic but in practice it becomes more complicated, especially when policy is not consistent with the means. But Clausewitz did not fail to modify his maxim to account for this phenomenon when he wrote: "The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose."⁽⁸⁸⁾

In the summer of 1980 Saddam Hussein faced such a dilemma-- how to reconcile his political objectives with his military means? The Ayatollah Khomeini's subversive efforts to undermine Hussein's Baath Party were beginning to crack the confidence of Iraq's minority Sunni leadership. To remove Khomeini's revolutionary threat, which transcended Iran's borders and aimed for the Shia majority, the Iraqi high command recommended war. But to eliminate Khomeini required Iraq to embark upon total war, a strategy which would have been inconsistent with Iraq's means. This becomes all too clear when one examines the map. Iran, unlike Iraq, is blessed with strategic depth as evidenced by Tehran's distance from the border.

But Clausewitz provides an answer to the Iraqi dilemma in Chapter Seven of Book Eight in On War--"The Limited Aim: Offensive War." "Even when we can not hope to defeat the enemy totally a direct and positive aim is possible: the occupation of part of his territory."⁽⁸⁹⁾ Clausewitz clearly envisioned this piece of "territory" as a bargaining chip in a forthcoming

peace settlement. It appears the Iraqi high command chose limited war for several reasons. First, Iran appeared to be in a state of turmoil with divergent groups vying for political power. Second, Khuzestan Province, the object of Iraq's limited land grab, was populated by an Arab majority. Hussein hoped to engender mass defections to his Pan-Arab cause with the Iraqi invasion of Iran, thus promoting Khomeini's loss of face and, in turn, his downfall. Lastly, a state of war between the two countries which would not end in a Iraqi defeat temporarily would attain Hussein's political objective of remaining in power. For him, not losing was winning. However, what neither Clausewitz nor Hussein could foresee was Iran's reaction to Iraq's limited war.

The failure of Iraq's military strategy to overthrow Khomeini can be traced in part to the Iraqi High Command's failure to apply the principles of operational art (analyzed later). From that point on, military means no longer were the primary arbiter of military campaigns for either side. After Iraq's initial attempt to attain its political objectives failed, the influence of religion, domestic politics, and demographics rose in importance as critical considerations in the design of campaigns.

Religion has had a profound impact on the political objectives of both sides which in turn have influenced the shape of campaigns. In Iran's case one could add a corollary to Clausewitz's dictum of war being merely a "continuation of policy by other means."⁽⁹⁰⁾ Instead war would be a continuation of religion by other means. This became all too clear to Iraq after Hussein unilaterally withdrew his forces from Iran in June of 1982. Islamic ideology, coupled with Khomeini's vindictiveness, surged forward to forge Iran's new political objective--the overthrow of Hussein and the Baath Party. This goal has helped shaped Iranian campaigns to the present,

providing the justification for sending hundreds of thousands of young boys to their death, all in the name of Allah.

In the case of Iraq, religion and domestic affairs mesh to such a great extent that Saddam Hussein has been constrained militarily. Since the Iraqi blood bath at Khorramshahr (October 1980), Hussein has been extremely reluctant to prosecute the ground war vigorously, fearing the consequences of large numbers of casualties. His fear stems from the fact that the army is largely Shiite in origin, with its leadership coming almost exclusively from the Sunni sect. Coupled with the fact that Iraq is ruled by a closed Sunni minority, it serves only to heighten Hussein's dread. This fear has been reflected in the scope and intensity of Iraq's campaign to bring Iran to the peace table. Since Hussein's self imposed withdrawal, Iraq has remained almost exclusively on the strategic, operational, and tactical defense, choosing instead to rely upon air power as her only offensive force. Ironically, as the war has lingered on the fear of a Shiite revolt within the army has waned. However, the Iraqi High Command has not seen fit to restructure its campaign based upon the amelioration of the threat. The rationale for this absence of change has its roots in the demography of the two warring nations.

The demographic imbalance, perhaps more than any other, has limited the Iraqi campaign while enabling Iran to prosecute its morally bankrupt campaign with a fiendish bent. "Every year three times as many Iranian males come of military age as do Iraqis."⁽⁹¹⁾ This fact alone has allowed Iran to prosecute a war of exhaustion, bleeding its own youth to death on Iraqi defenses in hopes of bringing Iraq to her knees. Iraq has responded to this imbalance by confining her operations to the defensive, counterattacking only when she was in danger of losing large amounts of territory, a prospect that

has also forced Iraq to use vast amounts of chemical weapons to balance the inequity in the force structure.

II. Center of Gravity

The Iran-Iraq war is now well into its ninth year, and the death bell continues to toll with some casualty estimates soaring well into the millions. Neither side is nearer victory than it was in 1980. This raises the question--did this have to be?

We have examined Iraq's initial strategy of limited war. Perhaps it was flawed, based as it was upon the hope of engendering a political response. No one will ever know because Iraq's military plan to capture Khuzestan Province failed. Nonetheless, military theory can provide a framework which will help us ascertain why it and succeeding operations on both sides continually have failed to bring the war to a close.

Clausewitz posited that to secure the political objective of war the enemy must be rendered powerless.(92) To Clausewitz this meant the destruction of the opposing force in a single climactic battle.(93) However, since Clausewitzian times, the conduct of war has become the province of nation states. In that vein, national armies have grown to such an extent that their defeat can not be affected in a single climactic battle.

The US Army understands this dilemma and has codified its approach to this matter in the operational level of war. Field Manual (FM) 100-5 defines this perspective of war as "the employment of military forces to attain strategic goals in a theater of war or a theater of operations through the design, organization, and conduct of campaigns and major operations."(94) Key to the design of campaigns is Clausewitz's concept of the center of gravity.

In On War, Clausewitz insists that the center of gravity is a combat formation. "A center of gravity is always found where the mass is

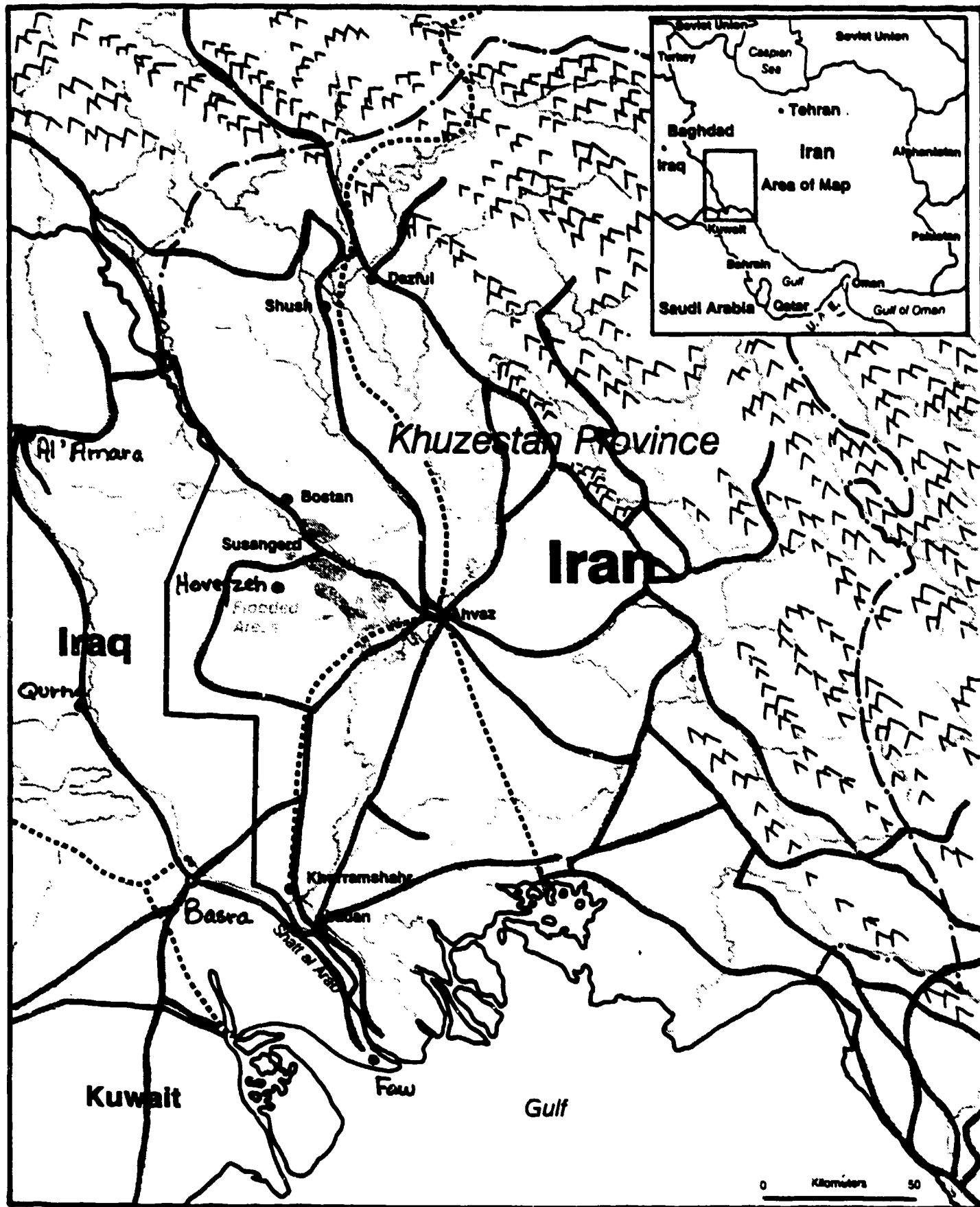
concentrated most densely. It presents the most effective target for a blow; furthermore, the heaviest blow is that struck by the center of gravity." (95) He continues that the way to destroy the enemy is to strike his center of gravity at the decisive point. (96)

Baron Henri-Antoine Jomini in his treatise The Art of War covers the concept of decisive point in much greater depth than Clausewitz. Jomini defined the concept in geographic terms and posited that the capture of this point in relation to the enemy would enable the attacker to exercise a marked influence upon the result of the campaign. (97) Another way to look at the concept is to envision it as being the key that unlocks the enemy's center of gravity. If you seize the decisive point with sufficient combat power, ideally your own center of gravity, then you will unbalance your opponents center of gravity, resulting in his defeat and destruction.

Let us now apply these two key concepts of operational art to the Iran-Iraq war and see if the belligerents have employed them. We will accomplish this by focusing on where the centers of gravity were in various phases, whether either side recognized them, and if either side was able to identify and attack the other's decisive points.

Iraq's initial campaign plan thrust three forces across the border into Iran. III Corps was its main effort and the Iraqi center of gravity. These four divisions crossed the border on a broad front aiming for the economically important but militarily insignificant towns of Khorramshahr, Abadan, Susangerd, and Dezful. One prong of the Iraqi center of gravity, however, did aim at the critical communications' hub of Ahvaz. This city was the key to Khuzestan Province and the decisive point of Iraq's campaign. Its seizure would have compelled the Iranian center of gravity, the armored division stationed near Ahvaz, to turn and fight or to wither on the vine. Moreover, Iraq's seizure of Ahvaz would have negated the military

AHVAZ: CRITICAL COMMUNICATIONS HUB



Map by Cordesman;
Ellison

significance of the foot mobile Revolutionary Guards defending the Iranian cities to the south.

But the Iraqi effort to capture simultaneously all of Khuzestan's towns transformed them into decisive points from the Iranian perspective. Since Iraq sought to take them all, failure at any one would unhinge Iraq's effort. Khorramshahr fell to Hussein's forces on the 13th of October, but Iraq continued to flail away at the remainder of the Iranian strong points, sending armor units to their demise in the urban death traps. It was precisely in this environment that Hussein made a critical mistake, diverting forces away from Ahvaz to focus on the militarily insignificant town of Abadan.

In the end, Iraq failed to take Abadan, a fact that is unimportant by itself. What is important is that from an operational perspective Iraq failed to sequence its actions to seize the decisive point of Ahvaz. From an Iranian viewpoint, Iraq's decision to focus on the city of Abadan played right into Iran's hands. Iran was able to buy time, bringing up reinforcements to bolster its defenses. From this moment on the war quickly devolved into its static form.

By early December 1980 both nations had assumed the operational defensive. Iran took advantage of this operational lull to rush its Revolutionary Guards to the front while Iraq improved her defensive positions. Clearly those forces occupying Khuzestan Province were Iraq's center of gravity while Iran appears to have shifted the burden of her defense to the fanatical Revolutionary Guards. Iraq's key to the province remained Ahvaz, the decisive point. This has not changed throughout the war. Whether Iraq has been able to identify it as such is questionable. If Iraq is able to identify Ahvaz as key, it is doubtful whether she has the will, either political or military, to attack it.

Iran broke the stalemate in September 1981, launching two infantry divisions towards the city of Abadan. During the next ten months, Iran continually switched her center of gravity up and down the frontier, attempting to regain lost territory. The actions of both sides resembled a pair of battering rams, each trying to butt the other directly into oblivion.

This did not have to be the case and theory provides a possible solution. The British theorist, Liddell Hart, provided a framework in his book, Strategy. Liddell Hart posited that dislocation was the aim of strategy, and "the true aim is not so much to seek battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by a battle is sure to achieve it."⁽⁹⁸⁾ Such an indirect attack launched to seize a decisive point might have turned the Iraqi III Corps out of its defensive position, resulting in an Iranian victory. This is true as of this writing and has been since September of 1981. From Qasr-e Shirin to Baghdad, the distance is a mere 80 miles over terrain suitable for armor vehicles. Baghdad is the soul of the Sunni regime and is guarded by two Iraqi armored divisions. It most certainly is a decisive point, and its seizure would compel Iraq's III Corps to turn and fight.

The unilateral withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Iran marked the beginning of a second stalemate. Hussein wanted peace more than ever, but he prepared for war, knowing as he did the fervor of the Islamic fanatics. Iraq expanded the size of III Corps to eight divisions and prepared for the Iranian onslaught.

Iran did not disappoint Hussein, launching attack after attack directly at Iraq's center of gravity in the vicinity of Basra. Cooperation between Iran's regular army and the Revolutionary Guards had improved since Bani Sadr's departure, yet the Guards still bore the heaviest share of fighting. Iran's frontal assaults on Basra proved disastrous, resulting in the typical

Iranian response of shifting her main effort all over the map searching for a breakthrough. It was during this period that Hussein, apparently resigned to the fact that he could not win the land war, turned to air power, hoping to exhaust Iran materially over time.

In March of 1984 the war moved away from the battlefield to the vital shipping lanes of the Persian Gulf. Both sides shifted their foci away from destroying the other's center of gravity to damaging the others economic support system. Iraq hoped to engender a political settlement based upon military action, but in no way did the military operation compel the desired political outcome. Clausewitz's dictum that relates military to political policy was only half understood and totally misapplied.

As the war moved into 1985 the focus once again returned to the battlefields around Basra. Iran continued to flail away at the mass of Iraqi forces, slamming seven more divisions directly into the jaws of the Iraqi defenses. Iran's losses were appalling, numbering close to 20,000 in this single action alone. Iran clearly recognized that III Corps was Iraq's center of gravity, yet she continued to shove forces into this meat grinder, scarring Iran for generations to come. The inability of either side to recognize and attack the other's decisive point has contributed greatly to this slaughter.

In February of 1986 the war evolved into a new phase with Iran taking actions to break the deadlock. Iran's military actions took a quantitative leap in sophistication. Utilizing a modicum of deception, Iran fixed Iraq's III Corps at Basra and made an end run around Faw. An Iranian center of gravity comprised of 6 divisions grabbed a lodgement on Iraq's Faw Peninsula, forcing Iraq to transfer reserves to Faw in order to protect her center of gravity around Basra. Iran quickly pushed her forces north, exceeding their culminating point in the process. The Iraqi forces responded methodically, forcing the Iranians back into defensive positions around Faw.

Since the battle for the Faw Peninsula the war has remained essentially static with few exceptions. In April of 1988 Iraq did manage to evict Iran from the Faw Peninsula, but this was essentially a counterattack on Iraq's part to regain her lost territory. For the most part the belligerents implicitly recognize the other's center of gravity, but they are unable to find the key to unlock it. This failure lies in two areas -- a lack of understanding of the operational art to include the sequencing of actions and a lack of combined arms warfare.

III. Sequencing Actions.

Operational art does not just consist of identifying the enemy's center of gravity and decisive points. It is much more, as we alluded to earlier in the discussion on modern armies. To defeat such a force on the modern battlefield, the operational planner must sequence military actions to achieve the strategic objective. He must anticipate the possible outcomes of battle, planning sequels (follow on courses of actions for success) and branches (alternatives for failure and unforeseen enemy action). But proper sequencing alone is not a panacea. Tactical commanders must win their fight, for without tactical victories there can be no operational art.

Throughout the war both Iran and Iraq have had trouble winning their tactical battles. This in a broad way can be traced back to their lack of understanding of combined arms warfare. But this is not the sole reason. The unwillingness to incur casualties (Iraq), the lack of spare parts (Iran), a weak resupply system (both), a lack of dedicated air support (both), a lack of ammunition (Iran), and the inability to maneuver (both) have all contributed to Iran's and Iraq's poor tactical performances. Iran, especially, has compounded these tactical mistakes by failing to plan logical branches for her frequent operational blunders. A typical Iranian branch

consisted of shifting the focus of her attack several hundreds of kilometers in either direction in hopes of meeting success.

During the course of the war there have been times when events have logically followed each other, but this is the exception rather than the rule. When such an event did occur, it normally ended in vain since the planners had failed to envision the last step before taking the first step. One of few examples is the Faw Counteroffensive. From an operational perspective, Iran's failure to provide a force (sequel) to exploit the seizure of the Faw bridgedhead doomed the venture to failure.

CONCLUSION

It should be fairly obvious now that neither side in this dreary war has developed much of a flair for the operational art. Even if achieved, it is doubtful the skills and materiel are there to put it into practice. Operational art is and always will be held captive to the ability of tactical commanders to win the tactical battle. There are exceptions, of course, such as an internal revolution which saps the will of an army to fight (the Russian Army of 1917), but when both sides are unable to fight in an operational sense, but willing to bleed to the last drop of their soldiers' blood, then the true horror of mindless war comes home.

Iran, with her superior manpower and other inherent advantages, could probably put together a campaign to achieve her political/religious objectives. But in her irrational polity she probably will not. Iraq's possibilities for winning the war are much more limited. For all the reasons discussed earlier, Iraq's best prospect lies with her ability to finesse the rest of the civilized world by believing that "no war" is an imperative for the good of the world, and thereby enlist outside aid in concluding it. Currently, Iraq is headed in the right direction, drawing the US into the

conflict. It appears that Iraq with indirect US assistance hopes to isolate Iran economically from the rest of the world. But even that solution is maddeningly evasive.

The Iran-Iraq war will continue indefinitely unless there is a revolution in the internal affairs of the belligerents. Short of that, the pointless and pathetically unfortunate killing will continue unabated in this most apocalyptic of wars. The time has long since passed for the leaders of both countries to have settled their differences peacefully. War has not served their policies well. It has only led to the wasting of millions of innocent lives. Unless war is a continuation of policy, then it can only be a minion of death.

ENDNOTES

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2. William O. Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis" in the Iran-Iraq War eds. Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983) , p. 28.
3. Ibid.
4. John Keegan, ed., World Armies (New York: Facts on File, 1979) , p. 337. Iraq was successively conquered by two Turcoman Confederations, the Safvid dynasty of Iran, by the Ottoman Turks, by the Persians again, the Ottomans again, and an Islamic slave army.
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6. Ibid., p. 338.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 339.
10. Ibid., p. 338.
11. Ibid., p. 328.
12. Daniel Pipes, "A Border Adrift: Origins of Conflict" in Iran-Iraq War eds. Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983) , p. 12.
13. Ibid. , p. 16.
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15. Keegan, op cit. p. 835.
16. Ibid.
17. Pipes, op cit. pp. 9-10.

18. Thomas Naff, ed., Gulf Security and The Iran-Iraq War (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1985), p. 137.
19. Keegan, op cit, p. 835.
20. Ibid., p.837.
21. King, op cit, p. 6.
22. Pipes, op cit, p. 11.
23. Ibid.
24. King, op cit, p. 9.
25. Ibid., p. 8.
26. Naff, op cit, p. 138.
27. Efraim Karsh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis," Adelphi Papers (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1987), p. 12.
28. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and The Search for Strategic Stability (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 729. The Revolutionary Guards numbered approximately 100,000 while the regular army numbered around 135,000. (Estimated)
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33. Ibid., p. 14.
34. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and The Search For Strategic Stability (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 635.
35. Karsh, op cit, p. 15.
36. Anthony Cordesman, "Lessons of The Iran-Iraq War: The First Round," Armed Forces Journal, April, 1982, p. 47.

37. Karsh, op cit, p. 13.
38. Anthony Cordesman, "Lessons of The Iran- Iraq War: The First Round," Armed Forces Journal, April, 1982, p. 44.
39. Anthony Cordesman, "Lessons of The Iran-Iraq War: Part Two- Tactics, Technology, and Training," Armed Forces Journal, June, 1982, p. 74.
40. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and The Search For Strategic Stability (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 666.
41. William O. Staudenmaier, "Military Policy and Strategy in the Gulf War," Parameters, June, 1982, p. 28.
42. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and The Search For Strategic Stability (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 700.
43. "War Between Iran and Iraq," Strategic Survey: 1980-1981 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981) , p. 50.
44. Anthony Cordesman, "Lessons of The Iran-Iraq War: The First Round," Armed Forces Journal, April, 1982, p. 47.
45. "War Between Iran and Iraq," op cit, p. 50.
46. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and The Search For Strategic Stability (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 701.
47. "War Between Iran and Iraq," op cit, p. 50.
48. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and The Search For Strategic Stability (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 713.
49. Ibid., p. 714.
50. Carl von Clausewitz, On War , edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) , p. 87.
51. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and The Search For Strategic Stability (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 669.

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60. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and Search For Strategic Studies (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 673.
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62. Karsh, op cit, p. 25.
63. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and Search For Strategic Stability (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 680.
64. Karsh, op cit, p. 25.
65. "Iran: Consolidation and Repression," Strategic Surveys: 1982-1983 (London: International Institut for Strategic Studies, 1983), p. 79.
66. Karsh, op cit, p. 25.
67. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and The Search for Strategic Stability (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 681.
68. Karsh, op cit, p. 26.
69. Anthony Cordesman, The Gulf and The Search For Strategic Stablitiy (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1984), p. 152.

70. Anthony Cordesman, The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security 1984-1987 (London: Janes' Publishing Co., 1987), p. xvii.

71. Karsh, op cit, p. 27.

72. Ibid.

73. Anthony Cordesman, The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security 1984-1987 (London: Janes' Publishing Co., 1987), p. 62.

74. Ibid., p. 63.

75. Karsh, op cit, p. 29.

76. Anthony Cordesman, The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security 1984-1987 (London: Janes' Publishing, Co., 1987), p. 66.

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79. Ibid., p. 69.

80. Ibid., p. 74.

81. Karsh, op cit, p. 31.

82. Ibid.

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